2018

LIT

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LIT

by

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Bachelor of Science, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR, 2015

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2018

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Brumfield, Tyler, M.F.A., May 2018

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LIT investigates the power of our daily visual interactions with commercial signage. The exhibition is comprised of ten individual illuminated constructions that appropriate the aesthetic strategies and design elements from commercial signage. The work offers the viewer a new aesthetic experience by nullifying the communicative and directional agendas that would normally accompany commercial signage. The viewer is free to see and experience the captivating nature of formal elements such as shape, color and light. The work explores the intersection of appropriation, minimal aesthetics and everyday experiences.

This body of work came about because I had an impactful experience with an illuminated commercial sign that made me question the validity of my "highly-trained" and refined visual palette and the value of my $100,000 education. However, I could not deny the validity and power of that visual experience. It was visceral and interesting. I was engaged. I was doing all of the things that I hope a viewer would do with one of my own pieces: examining it, gazing at it, pondering it in wonder. I was an active viewer. But it was just a tacky commercial sign, glowing in the night sky! Little did I know that in that moment, the idea for my thesis work began to grow.

I am interested in a particular two-dimensionality in sculpture, which is ironic because sculpture is the three-dimensional art: the art that occupies real space. My attraction to three-dimensional objects that look two-dimensional puzzled me for quite some time. I was aware of this interest but could never quite explain it beyond: "I like the way it looks" (which is the art world equivalent of "neat"). Mel Katz, one of my favorite artists, whose work has been enormously influential for me, makes three-dimensional work that has a two-dimensional, graphic quality. I did extensive research to discover the rhetoric Katz utilizes when questioned about the graphic quality of his work. To answer, he simply shrugs his shoulders and says the work is about a painter becoming a

Figure 1, Mel Katz, Grey Concrete/Steel I, 1985, Cast Concrete and Steel.

sculptor.[1] I was severely disappointed in his answer. I suppose I was expecting an intellectual response that would answer all of my questions.

However, I did learn that his father was a tailor. Katz often cited his formative experiences watching his father cut out templates and patterns for garments.[2] This makes more sense to me, but his response didn't work for me, my father is not a tailor. I entered graduate school and proceeded to slam my head into walls (mostly metaphorically) trying to ground my aesthetic tendencies in something. My pre-candidacy review was the culmination of my failure to discover the origins of my aesthetic tendencies. I passed the review feeling like I didn't deserve to pass, despite the extensive effort and research that went into the work. After that, I didn't make much sculpture. I learned the basics of wheel-throwing, made a body of work using found-objects, and built a large scale piece for a show in Oregon. Mostly, I avoided thinking about my thesis.

While doing some "research" on the World Wide Web one September evening in 2017, I stumbled upon an article concerning renowned contemporary artist James Turrell. Speaking of Turrell's art education, the author writes "he discovered that he preferred the luminosity of slides - especially those of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko - above the original paintings."[3] For Turrell, the color field abstract paintings of Newman or Rothko, when viewed in person, were nowhere near as luminous and affecting as their projected images. This was enlightening: James Turrell was more impacted by the visual experience of beholding an artwork through a projector than he was by the work in person. For him, it was a formative moment in the trajectory of his practice and methods. I resonated with Turrell's sentiments and experience regarding projected images, but in a very different way.

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[1] Johnson, Barry, *Mel Katz: On and Off the Wall* (Salem: Hallie Ford Museum of Art, 2015), 13
[2] Johnson, *Mel Katz: On and Off the Wall*, 22
[3] Beyst, Stefan, "James Turrell: A Sculptor of Light," http://d-sites.net/english/turrell.html, (September 23, 2017)

My introduction to sculpture began with and was sustained through projected images. I experienced drastically more sculpture through two-dimensional imagery than I did in person. Hence, my discovery: my fascination with two-dimensionality in sculpture is so dominant because my formative interactions with sculpture happened entirely through images. The two-dimensional nature of images of sculpture became imprinted on my consciousness. Heading into my thesis work, I had an explanation and a justification for the two-dimensional quality my sculptures exemplified. My experience with the commercial sign suddenly gained a newfound potential.

Commercial signs fascinate me because our eyes and our brains process them as images despite the fact that they are objects. Their flatness, planar construction, graphic quality and placement against a ground (such as the sky or the side of a building) make them legible as images when, in fact, they are objects! A giant illuminated Domino's sign is, without a doubt, an object, though it's made to appear as an image when we walk or drive by. This directly coincided with the discovery about my attraction to three-dimensional objects that looked two-dimensional. Commercial signs are very large objects that occupy a curious

Figure 2, Ellsworth Kelly, Blue Curve, 1996, Oil on Canvas.

perceptual expanse between image and object. I was fascinated by the ramifications that this perceptual expanse had for art. Commercial signage seemed to unify and synthesize the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional in physical space. It presented an area of our visual landscape where clear lines between image and object dissolve into a mesmerizing lack of clarity. And it is within this lack of clarity that critical looking may begin.

My impactful visual experience with the commercial sign combined with newfound knowledge about my aesthetic tendencies led me toward the creation of a new body of work. My goal was to subvert the consumerism and commercialism that accompany illuminated signage to offer the viewer a meaningful, powerful aesthetic experience through which they are able to see something familiar in a new light. In order to do this, I had to employ a few different strategies.

First, I did extensive research regarding how illuminated commercial signage is fabricated. I learned how to work with the materials they're made out of, because my work had to be as well-made as the real deal. The sculptures had to visually operate in the same way that real illuminated commercial signage would, so viewers wouldn't get hung up on issues of craftsmanship or believability. Second, I abandoned the directional and communicative ambitions of commercial signage. Signs often direct us to a specific location with the movement in their design. The sign will guide your eye to the right or to the left, or down or up. I worked to make my sculptures seem to point in several different directions, so they lead you everywhere or nowhere. Additionally, illuminated commercial signage usually contains text that explains the nature of the establishment or product that is being advertised, and text is what viewer's usually process first if text is present in design. They want to know: What is this, what's the message, what's the brand? To bypass this response, I removed any communicative function from the

sign-sculptures I made. The result is that the viewer is free to drink in the visual experience of the shape, color, light and arrangement of them, without the distraction of text.

To begin making the work, I looked at signage to visually study it. I looked at the colors, the graphics, the design, the text, the shapes, the light and the placement. It was remarkable how many similarities they shared with Hard-Edge Abstraction. Both contained unmistakable legibility and immediacy, bold colors and strict geometry. More importantly, they occupied the liminal space between image and object. Hard-Edge Abstraction, particularly works by Ellsworth Kelly and Kenneth Noland, read more like objects or sculptures than they did paintings. The painters explored sculptural issues like surface, shape and surroundings through painting.[4]

I desired to make work that exemplified theirs: work that had poise, brevity, elegance, clarity, cleanliness and the guise of simplicity, but also confronted the viewer and challenged perception and easy categorization. However, as a contemporary artist, it became necessary for me to escape the rhetoric of Greenbergian Formalism that enveloped their work. Emulation was neither satisfying nor possible, so I turned to the Post-Modern strategy of appropriation.

Figure 3, Roy Lichtenstein, Brushstrokes, 1965, Oil on Canvas

Pop Art canonized the technique of appropriation in Western art. James Rosenquist painted imagery from commercial billboard advertisements in galleries. Roy Lichtenstein meticulously painted comic strip imagery in oil on

[4] Colpitt, Francis, *Minimal Art: the Critical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 33

canvas. Andy Warhol painted Campbell's soup cans and screen printed tabloid photographs. These artists looked to other disciplines of image making - like comic strips and billboards - for material, techniques, and imagery to bring into fine art. Curiously, it had never occurred to me just how much research and learning this required. Roy Lichtenstein, for example, was not a comic book illustrator. He had to learn the aspects of comic book illustration in order to execute the artwork he envisioned. He had to practice the techniques, aesthetics, rendering style, color use and visual format of comic strip imagery in order to make his work believable. That was no small task! I was captivated by the idea of making art by appropriating techniques and imagery from specific industries, but changing or subverting the intention.

With the Pop impulse fresh in my mind, commercial signage came alive as a visual arena that was rich with powerful aesthetic strategies that I could appropriate: color, light, shape, composition, geometry, etc. Additionally, commercial signage is a part of our everyday landscape. We interact with it every day, multiple times a day. We cannot drive down the road or walk down the street without coming across a sign. But signage is not something that we are keenly aware of or look at intently. We understand it so quickly that we don't really need to look at it. It is advertisement, designed to catch attention with color, light and placement in space, then immediately communicate its message with the intent to turn the looker into a consumer.

My research into commercial signage fabrication began. I delved deeply into the industry, fascinated and hungry to learn. My work had to be believable to be effective. I learned about industry-specific materials and tools like heat benders and vinyl overlay. I learned how to fabricate with acrylic sheeting: how to cut it, heat bend it, and weld it. I learned how commercial signage is illuminated: with LED lights spaced in a particular way to create an even, solid field of light.

Figure 4, Tony Smith, Die, 1962, Steel.

My study of industry and fabrication led me to another important area of research for my new body of work: Minimalism. American Minimalist artists of the 1960's and 70's expressed a captivation with industry, fabrication, production and seriality, all techniques borrowed from the manufacturing of products. Additionally, the artists used unmistakable geometry: shapes that could not possibly have visual reference or representational qualities. The work was so reductive that it drew more attention to its surroundings than to itself. The result was an increased emphasis on viewer experience and response; simpler forms create stronger sensations.[5] The reduction of formal elements and the loss of hierarchy between them resulted in a new way to unify abstract art: immediacy. A piece like Tony Smith's *Die* was read and processed as a whole, not as a sum of parts, but an immediate and powerful whole. The ideas of simplicity, immediacy, and viewer experience interested me in the context of commercial signage. Well-made signage presents a clear hierarchy of processing and the simplest of design elements, usually geometric – a rich cross-over with my evolving body of work.

Pop and Minimalism happened simultaneously. They were popular during the same period of time, but their forms and rhetoric were so dissimilar that little cross-over occurred. One artist stood out to me as an individual who borrowed ideas from both: Dan Flavin. He made Minimal sculptures and installations using prefabricated fluorescent light tubes. Ideas from

[5] Colpitt, *Minimalism: a Critical Perspective*, 43

Figure 5, Dan Flavin, Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi), 1963, Fluorescent Light Tube and Housing.

Minimalism such as seriality, repeatability, simplicity and emphasis on viewer experience were present in his work. Ideas from Pop Art, like relying on common experience and borrowing objects from everyday life were present in his work too. I saw his work as a bridge between Pop Art and Minimalism. He was an individual who successfully synthesized the form and rhetoric of both movements.

His work fell into two distinct categories: total-room/site-specific installations and smaller scale individual constructions.[6] A clear line was felt between installation and sculpture - an important distinction in understanding Flavin's work and, in turn, mine. In his individual constructions, the visual alteration of architectural space was of little importance. Rather, the viewer was made aware of the object-ness of the light tube, its prefabricated quality, and its change in placement from overhead facing downward to wall-mounted facing outward. Its function as an illuminating device remained, but the function was subverted and made less efficient by its placement. His pieces were captivating. Viewers were drawn to his work like mosquitoes to a lantern. They couldn't help but be drawn to them because it was a solitary source, a single origin of light in an otherwise dark space.

Conceptually, the remarkable quality of Flavin's early work is this: fluorescent light tubes illuminated virtually every office, warehouse, commercial space, gallery, airport, shop, institution and business; they were the definition of ubiquity, but a simple change in placement and context granted them a new visibility, a new way to be seen. The viewer left their experience

[6] Bell, Tiffany, "Fluorescent Light as Art," In *Dan Flavin: a Retrospective* (Beacon: Dia Art Foundation, 2004), 112

with a work like *Diagonal of May 25, 1963* with changed vision. By changing the typical strategies of fluorescent light installation, Flavin changed the way that the viewer sees fluorescent light tubes.

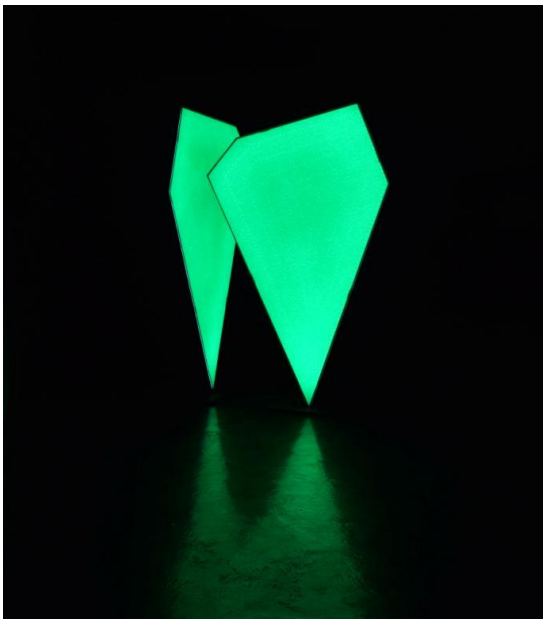
Flavin didn't rule out even the most common material and experience as something that could provoke a powerful response in the viewer; in fact, its ubiquity gives it its power.[7] It was engaging because it relied on the reality of daily life. Flavin considered that the viewer had hundreds of thousands of experiences with fluorescent light tubes that went entirely unregarded. In fact, the viewer most likely walked under fluorescent light tubes inside of the museum or gallery his work was in! Flavin's work made viewers aware of an everyday experience they had with an object. By heightening the viewer's awareness, he questioned our interactions with objects, like Minimalism did, and pulled materials from "low" places and brought them to "high" places, like Pop Art did.

The pieces that make up "LIT" are drastically reductive and deceptively simple. I went to great lengths to reduce the hand of the artist. I made objects that look industrially made. I pulled back my own desire to interject formal hierarchy and proportional relationships between parts. The shapes are simple geometric shapes: rectangles, triangles and polygons in simple configurations. I chose simple geometric shapes and bold colors because signage is made up of simple geometric design elements in bold colors.

By reducing the work to simple geometry, the viewer doesn't become entangled trying to interpret and understand the shapes. The shapes are immediately understood for what they are: shapes. As a sculptor, it was imperative that I change the visual language of commercial signage beyond removing and obscuring the communicate text/brand and directional obligation. This came about through the display of the work and the physical spaces it occupied.

[7]Govan, Michael, "Irony and Light," In *Dan Flavin: a Retrospective* (Beacon: Dia Art Foundation, 2004), 68

Figure 6, Tyler Brumfield, Free-standing Green Polygons, 2018, Acrylic, Vinyl and LED lights



Several pieces exist in ways that ordinary commercial signage never would. A polygon shape rests on the floor facing upward, so the light shines up from the floor. A large rectangular shape horizontally spans a corner and shines light into the corner, away from the viewer. Polygons create a bridge from wall to floor, precariously balancing on single points. The show is comprised of works that are individual constructions. It is not a total room installation; rather, it provides the viewer with individual interactions with objects that reference commercial signage in order to change the way that they see it.

The work is subversive and ironic. The work subverts the consumerism and commercialism that accompany illuminated signage to offer the viewer a meaningful, powerful aesthetic experience; a new way to see something familiar. I provide the viewer with the opportunity to have a meaningful visual experience with objects that were never intended to carry meaning beyond immediate communication and direction. Illuminated signs are little more than beacons: bright, bold and boisterous. They grab our attention with light, color, shape, and placement in space, and then communicate with text and recognizable brand. Through appropriating successful, eye-catching strategies of commercial signage but abandoning its communicative and directional ambitions, I free the viewer to see and experience something familiar in an entirely new way. Without text, recognizable imagery, or clear direction, illuminated signage can only be understood as glowing geometric shapes in space. They are read formally with regard for their color, shape, and placement in space. The viewer is left with the

visual, perceptual and physical experience of them, and the curious opportunity to deliberate if the pieces are images or objects, and whether or not it even matters. The work offers the viewer a visual break; a quiet moment with art that couldn't be much louder, visually.

In a rapidly changing world where exchanges between reality and the virtual occur on a second by second basis, what is the role of visual art? Individuals are spending increasing amounts of time operating in realms outside of the physical. Humans are beginning to occupy a kind of in-between space; a liminal space. Our ability to delineate mediated experience and real experience is diminishing. But can't mediated experience can be just as impactful as real experience? The impetus for James Turrell's work happened because of a mediated experience with art, and he is heralded as one of the great artists of our time. In a world where experiences vacillate between the real and virtual on a minute by minute basis, artists must be vigilant about living in a state of consistent awareness and constant looking. It is our role to be active lookers and critical thinkers. Impetus and impact can occur at any moment, no matter how seemingly insignificant. Like seeing a bright, bold and beautiful shape glowing in the night sky, for instance…

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